



PREVENTION OPPORTUNITIES UNDER THE BIG SKY

ARE MONTANANS PREPARED FOR EMERGENCIES? STEPS PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCIES ARE TAKING

September is National Preparedness Month. This is a nationwide effort to encourage Americans to take simple steps to prepare for emergencies in their homes, businesses and schools. The goal is to increase awareness about the importance of being prepared. The Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS), County and Tribal Health Agencies and partners are working together to prepare for health-related emergencies. This issue of *Montana Public Health* describes what Montanans report about being prepared and showcases some public health-related efforts to prepare for emergencies.

How Prepared are Montanans: Why focus on emergency preparedness in a publication devoted to prevention opportunities? The answer is: because preparedness and prevention are two sides of the same coin. Individuals and institutions that are better prepared to cope during emergencies will also be better equipped to prevent negative health outcomes that might stem from those emergencies.

In recent years the public health community has been stimulated to emphasize emergency preparedness. The anthrax attacks of 2001, followed by Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, opened official eyes to the need to prepare America's public health system to respond to major modern threats. As a result, Congress passed the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Act of 2002 to help bolster readiness in the U.S.

DPHHS has been working closely with local, state and federal partners in the public health and disaster and emergency services fields to enhance preparedness in Montana. It also has begun to explore the readiness of the general public to respond appropriately in emergency situations. In 2006, DPHHS asked a dozen questions about household preparedness as part of its annual Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance Survey (BRFSS).

Responses to these questions indicate a moderate level of preparedness among Montana households. Only about 28 percent of respondents thought their household was well-prepared to "safely ride out or withstand a large-scale disaster or emergency." While a little over half (56 percent) considered themselves somewhat prepared, about one in five (17%) reported they were not prepared at all.

Fifty-four percent reported their household had a three-day supply of water (1 gallon per person) for everyone

who lives there; 78 percent said that their household had a three-day supply of prescription medicine for each person who takes prescribed medicines; and 91 percent said that if public authorities announced a mandatory evacuation from their community due to a large-scale disaster or emergency, they would evacuate. Of those who said they would not evacuate, the reasons for not doing so included: concern for leaving property or pets, 22%; lack of trust in public officials, 16%; and concern for safety, 14%.

How health-care practitioners can help make preparedness a household word.

- Encourage patients who take essential medicines to plan ahead in ordering refills or purchasing so that they always have at least a 3-day supply on hand.
- Discuss emergency planning with vulnerable clients and patients, such as the elderly and people with disabilities. Have they identified a source of assistance in the event of an emergency?
- Be familiar with your community disaster and emergency preparedness planning efforts.

Building Systems to Respond to Health Threats:

Since 2001, state and local public health authorities have been working with health professionals throughout Montana to improve our ability to respond to health emergencies, as well as day-to-day health events—including those that directly impact health professionals.

The Health Alert Network (HAN). The HAN provides vital health information and the infrastructure to disseminate that information throughout the nation including in state and local areas. Montana's HAN Messaging System transmits Health Alerts, Advisories, and Updates to approximately 2500 health professionals via fax, email or phone. DPHHS and local health

agencies regularly use the system to provide relevant health information. Recently this system has shared information related to food recalls, Norovirus outbreaks and exposures to measles. During a national, state or local emergency, the HAN will be the primary means of sharing relevant information with health professionals.

Montana Public Health Laboratory (MTPHL) Courier Service. The MTPHL is integral to our health system. It supports disease surveillance activities and outbreak investigations, as well as monitoring for new or emerging infectious diseases.¹ To ensure rapid and secure transport of specimens, the MTPHL has contracted with Medical Logistics to deliver routine and sensitive specimens to our laboratory. This courier system covers approximately 80 percent of the state's population and delivers about 8,000 specimens monthly. This system ensures weekday pickup from 18 locations and nightly delivery to the state laboratory. During a health emergency, the system could be rapidly expanded to include additional pick-up sites and days of operation.

Active Surveillance for Communicable Disease. Quick reporting of selected communicable diseases is essential to recognizing and responding to events of public health importance. Even though routine reporting by health professionals and laboratories has been in place for decades, it can be a little confusing to know what, how and to whom to report. To improve this reporting system and communication with local health care providers, local health agencies have implemented *active surveillance*.

Active surveillance complements traditional passive reporting by contacting, weekly or bi-weekly, 400 providers and 75 laboratories that are likely to identify reportable conditions in order to elicit reports and share information. This active network allows public health to monitor more than just reportable diseases, including identification of clusters of illnesses that may be of interest but not specifically reportable. The information collected is disseminated back to providers and laboratories and, in some cases, stimulates HAN messages.

Recommendations for Health Care Professionals:

- Ensure your contact information is up to date at your local health agency to guarantee receipt of messages from the Health Alert Network (HAN).
- Know how to reach your local health agency to report cases and health events of interest. Your local agency can provide you with a current list of reportable conditions and the appropriate contact information.
- Encourage your patients and/or clients with special needs to be prepared for emergencies by keeping a list of medications including dosage, list of any allergies, and a list of doctors, relatives or friends who should be notified if they are hurt or displaced.

For more information regarding HAN, contact your local health department or Gerry Wheat, gwheat@mt.gov, (406)444-6736. For more information regarding the laboratory courier service, contact the Montana Public Health Laboratory, 800-821-7284.

References:

1. DPHHS, The Montana Public Health Laboratory: essential services for diagnosis and surveillance. *Montana Public Health*, 2007; 2(4).

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